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Lady V and Sadomasochism:

The Self-destruction and the Desires in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

Natsue Ambo

1. Introduction

If we read Thomas Pynchon's works, we realize that masochism is remarkably indicated and connected with the discussion about the sexuality in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Yet, considering Pynchon's earlier works, we can find out Pynchon already has started to show a kind of sadomasochism from some different points. This paper will demonstrate that Pynchon's *V.* (1963) displays several examples of this sadomasochism.

According to Leo Bersani, some masochists have a distinctive feature of "self-destruction." When the masochists are stimulated from sadists or other things, the subjects of masochists are destroyed by the stimulation of the environment. Also, in *V.*, female characters, whose initials are V, seem to be the female masochists. However, V is not merely a masochist because she has some strong effects on the society by utilizing self-destruction mentioned by Bersani. V forces people to become inanimate objects by using her self-destruction generated from her masochism.

This paper will discuss that Lady V is a sexually ambiguous trigger to make people have the desire of self-destruction. Moreover, the conclusion will be connected to the representation of the humans, who become the inanimate objects.

2. V as a Female Character and a Symptom

Before Lady V's masochism is demonstrated, it is imperative to explain what V is. In *V.*, while Herbert and Sidney Stencil try to chase the female V such as Victoria, Lady V, and Veronica, the initial V is constantly like a symbol. There are not any clues and clear definitions of V. Moreover, when it comes to V's gender, there is a "sexual ambiguity" (*V.* 63). Harold Broom conceives that "at no point in *V.* do we question V's biological sex, though in "V. in Love" and in her role as the Bad Priest, Stencil and Fausto identify her with masculine gender or sex role identity" (67). In addition, V is known "what sex V. might be, nor even what *genus* and *species*" (*V.* 63; my emphasis).

Considering another aspect of V, however, Pynchon sets any V and Vheissu as "a symptom" which is "always alive, somewhere in the world" (*V.* 473). Also, Victoria and V are depicted as if they "might be no more a she than a sailing vessel or a nation."

Victoria had with the Vheissu plot and Veronica with the new rat-order. If she was a historical fact, then she continued active today and at the moment, because the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name was as yet unrealized, though V. might be no more a she than a sailing vessel or a nation. (*V.* 63)

In *V.*, Victoria and Veronica are related to V and Vheissu by Stencil because Stencil assumes that there is a conspiracy between the wars and Lady V. In the novel, however, Stencil, and even the readers, can not find out who V is or what Vheissu is. Thus, it is clear that V is an ambiguous existence.

3. V's masochism; Self-destruction and Prothesis

From this section, the common feature among the various Vs will be demonstrated. Focused on V's bodies and their changes, both V as a human and a symptom have a common feature of masochism. In other words, V plays a role of the masochists. Therefore, section 3 eventually will discuss the common points between the masochism of V and Leo Bersani.

First, with regards to the common points of female characters such as Lady V, their body enhancements like plastic surgeries must be a clear shared point. For instance, Lady V "would so like to have an entire foot that way, a foot of amber and gold, with the veins, perhaps, in intaglio instead of bas-relief" (*V.* 488). Whereas some soldiers need the plastic surgery in order to recover from their injuries after the wars in *V.*, Vs have the surgeries to lose their flesh and to elevate their body enhancements. Thus, soldiers only wish to recover the injured parts of their bodies, whereas V pleasantly wants to change their bodies as if they do not feel pain.

Furthermore, according to the further analysis of V as a symptom, we can explain how she feels when she has surgery as follows:

"How *pleasant* to watch Nothing." Her face (so rarely had he seen it that way!) was at peace, the live eye dead as the other, with the clock-iris. He'd not been surprised at the eye; no more than at the star sapphire sewn into her navel. There is surgery; and surgery. Even in Florence — the comb, which she would never let him touch or remove — he had noted an obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter. (*V.* 488; my emphasis)

From the citation, we can discover V's obsession to do the prosthesis, which makes V feel "pleasant." In other words, V willingly changes her body and feels pleasure to lose her flesh as if she led to self-destruction.

As demonstrated above, V is satisfied with the surgery to enhance her body even if she loses

her flesh. Additionally, V as the Bad Priest, who has the “comb” that other Vs have, is dissolved by some innocent children in Malta (*V* 97). V repeats the disassembly and scatters the symbol like the comb. At the same time, the change of V’s body implies the pleasant self-destruction in accordance to V’s masochism.

4. Bersani’s Masochism and V

As mentioned in the introduction, Bersani’s masochism is considerable interest to associate V with masochism. Bersani’s masochism is not a simple sexual taste for humans to seek for sexual pleasure. Bersani notes that infants experience masochism in the form of self-destruction when they grow up and get stimulation from their environments or parents (Bersani 39). When the infants can make their own identities, their physical and mental development can cause their identities to be broken by the stimulations.

Also, from the perspective of masochism by Bersani, the infants can change the stimulation to their pleasure (Bersani 39). When the infants exceed their limits to keep their subject, they can change the stimulation to the pleasure. The pleasure reminds us of V’s pleasure when she has a surgery. The pleasure is supposed to be a Freudian term for sexual desire of infants. Yet, Bersani places importance on infants’ survival to attune themselves to the environment.

Bersani deals with the infants’ masochism which can be a good example to explain V’s masochism and environment. If infants can change the stimulation to pleasure, they have the potential to destruct and to change their identities. The infants’ subjects do lack a coherence and will be an uncanny existence mentioned by Sigmund Freud.

On the other hand, V is also an ambiguous existence. Moreover, the symbol of V keeps changing every chapter. V seems to have an aim to become an inanimate object, and the goal seems to be the same among the female characters, Lady V, Veronica, and the Bad Priest. However, V constantly attempts to become the other one and change herself with their pleasure by using their body enhancement, the surgery and the prothesis.

Furthermore, the symptom such as Vheissu is also uncanny. Vheissu has changed the definition by Herbert Stencil and the other male characters. The symptom constantly keeps changing itself, but it is unconsciously changed by men. In *V*, Vheissu is explained by some random male characters, but it keeps its silence until the novel is over. Therefore, during the Great War, Vheissu is constantly stimulated and changed the definition.

5. V as an Ambiguous Sadist

As noted above, Vs as a symptom repeatedly appear with some symbols such as artificial eyes, a star sapphire, a corm. However, as mentioned in the introduction, V is not just a simple symptom and a masochist. V’s masochism is associated with her change to become a sadist. Moreover, V also

has the possibility that she can be innocent and violent like the children in Malta. Therefore, V can be a sadist, and, at the same time, she can be an innocent female horrible character.

For instance, Victoria seems to be innocent because she does not know about the wars but she “was given enough material to evolve between visits a private back of beyond, a *colonial doll's* world she could play with and within constantly: developing, exploring, manipulating” (V. 73; my emphasis). Victoria’s face “betrayed no emotion” (V. 209) and she is just standing in the chaos in Florence. Therefore, it is possible that Victoria is in the side of colonizers and she as V has a violent personality, regardless of the fact that she is innocent, and she does not notice her violence.

When it comes to the sadist V, it is inevitable to mention Veronica’s sexual relationship with Melanie. Lady V instigates Melanie, “an inanimate object of desire,” to become the inanimate objects (V. 411). In the case of Melanie, she becomes a “fetish of fetish” (Mattessich 35) or a fetish of the master, Lady V. Melanie becomes a fetish as a ballet dancer and a sexual object for men and Lady V. Therefore, Lady V considers Melanie as a fusion of a consumer product and the inanimate objects like just “a clockwork doll” (V. 17). Because of the death of Melanie, she completely becomes the immortal fetish of Lady V. Consuming Melanie as a product, Lady V becomes a sadist who attempts to drive Melanie into having a desire to become the inanimate objects as a fetish for Lady V.

As discussed above, it is clear that V is in the strong position as a sadist. Despite the fact that the power balance between V and Melanie is discussed, what should be emphasized from here is that V such as Lady V and Veronica unconsciously become the sadists. As if Veronica is like an innocent but also a savage girl, and as if Lady V is a male master for Melanie, the two Vs already have a potential to become sadists.

6. “Metaphysical” Desire to Become an Inanimate Object

As indicated in section 5, it is likely that V unconsciously becomes a sadist. However, there is a necessary discussion about the relation among V, a conspiracy, and the Great War. This is because Pynchon strikingly shows that Sidney Stencil doubts that V is intimate with “Mussolini” (V. 134). In this section as Sidney Stencil doubts the conspiracy by V, the other perspective will be demonstrated. It is likely that V as the uncanny and ambiguous existence joins the conspiracy by becoming a trigger to cause the wars. Therefore, V tries to lead people to have a desire of becoming the inanimate objects. In other words, V unconsciously can affect the relation between the Great Wars and the male characters’ psychological fears.

Focused on Veronica Manganese’s rumors, those are always related to the politics in Italy.

She [Veronica] was now intimate with various renegade Italians, among them D’Annunzio the poet-militant, and one Mussolini, an active and troublesome anti-socialist. Her political

sympathies *weren't known*; whatever they *might be*, Whitehall was less than amused. (*V* 472-73; my emphasis)

Also, Veronica's income is not clear (*V* 473). There are just rumors about her. Although we cannot know about Veronica, however, Stencil arbitrarily considers Vs as females who have a relation with conspiracies or the Great Wars. The process of Stencil's paranoia is naturally led by Vs without a clear reason in the novels.

As mentioned above, V is an unclear existence so that we can not find out how V joins the conspiracy. However, V can have a strong and "metaphysical" effect on the male characters and the relationship among the countries during the wars by using the fear of V. V is an uncanny and unclear existence even if V seems to be in the side of the masochist. Before the effect of the "metaphysical desire" of the conspiracy is explained, the other example of the effect by the "metaphysical desire" in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) will be shown.

John Hamill insists on the "metaphysical desire" by using an example of Pudding's fantasies in *Gravity's Rainbow* compared with Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1547). First, Hamill mentions that René Girard's analysis of "metaphysical desires."

In Girard, sadomasochism is understood as a way of relating to the other, and of loving. Metaphysical desire reflects the desire of the individual for something transcendent, whether it be god or true love of "the real"; but because the object of this metaphysical desire is never possessable in this world, it is continually mediated by someone who acts as a substitute for that desire. (Hamill 54)

Girard insists that sadomasochism is related to "the other and of loving" effected by the "metaphysical desire." "Metaphysical" also means "other senses relating more generally to things which are immaterial, imaginary, preternatural, or supernatural" by *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, Girard uses "metaphysical desire" as an unseen or imaginary sadomasochism. Hamill makes a reference to the unseen and imaginary "metaphysical desire" for the discussion about sadomasochism in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The Domina Nocturna (or Mistress of the Night) is the mediator of Pudding desire. The Domina Nocturna is not, however, the same as Katje, but is partly the role that Katje plays or even possibly she merely re-enacts for Pudding the memory of a vision. As the mediator of Pudding's desire, she is the key part of a dream in the Great War. (Hamill 56)

Moreover, "Domina Nocturna asks the General what he is thinking and the narrative moves

effortlessly into Pudding's internalized fantasy as free indirect discourse" (Hamill 56). Pudding is dreaming of the Mistress of the Night even if the Mistress has a different personality as Katje Borgesius. Katje just plays her role as a spy. Furthermore, Hamill insists on Katje's entrapment.

Pudding is trapped in his nostalgia, yearning toward a moment of pleasure or ecstasy in the past, but that vision has led to social and psychological entrapment. As in many of Pynchon's sadomasochistic tableaux, desire results in a masking of the other. (Hamill 57)

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Katje is one of the important female characters who show their own sexual responsibility. Katje succeeds her role as a spy but she also has a sexual obligation regardless of her will. As the narrator tells about her ignored personality, "Katje ceases to be Katje and becomes just "The Mistress of the Night" and is never referred to in terms of her name" (Hamill 57).

As a result, however, Pudding is trapped by Katje's fake identity and appearance: "a noseless mask of the Other Order of Being, of Katje's being — the lifeless non-face that is the only face of hers he really knows, or will ever remember" (*GR* 222). Therefore, it can be said that Pudding eventually died because of Katje's double identities. In other words, Katje could drive Pudding to have a desire for the dead by using another personality as Domina Nocturna. Even if Katje seems to be in the weak position in the world of *Gravity's Rainbow*, she properly can use her personas intentionally, and sometimes unconsciously.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Katje plays a role as a spy. By using SM play, Katje can contribute to Captain Blicero, Viceman and Germany. Pudding does not like Pointsman's plans for Slothrop (*V* 83), but Pointsman uses Pudding by sending Katje. Although Katje always plays her role, she tries to compensate by changing the organization into the Counterforce (*V* 715). Katje is a double agent and anyone can not read what she is going to do next.

7. Profane's Fear and Unconscious Desire

Although Katje's sadism and her unclear face are discussed in section 5, in *V*, Profane is an important character when he is discussed with the fear of becoming the inanimate object and metaphysical desire. Unlike Pudding in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Profane does not feel the pleasure as a masochist. Moreover, Profane has never seen Lady V, Victoria, Veronica in person because the story about Profane is set in the 20th century. Therefore, Profane's dream is told in a different time from the Bad Priest's dream. However, focused on Profane's dream, it is similar to the Bad Priest's disassembly.

To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine. It was always

at this point that the fear started: here that it would turn into nightmare. Because now, if he kept going down that street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement, be scattered among manhole covers. (V. 40)

As mentioned above, Profane's nightmare is about his disassembly and he says that he feels as if his body is becoming an inanimate object or a machine; "sponge brain" and "clock of a heart." Although Profane are not directly affected by the Bad Priest, he is always afraid of the disassembly¹ and becoming just an "ivory": "[w]as it home, the mercury-lit street? Was he returning like the elephant to his graveyard, to lie down and soon become ivory in whose bulk slept, latent, exquisite shapes of chessmen, backscratchers, hollow open-work Chinese spheres nested one inside the other?" (V. 11). Profane is terrified of being disassembled and becoming an inanimate object such as the "ivory." Nevertheless, Profane can not break off the relationship with Paola who has the "ivory corm." Then, Profane is gone to toward the edge of Malta, and the Mediterranean beyond.

When it comes to "ivory" as a motif, we need to think about V. Ivory is used in V. many times as an icon of V. For example, Sidney Stencil sees Veronica wearing an ivory corm in Florence; "In the hair visible below the hat was a carved ivory comb, and five crucified faces, long-suffering beneath their helmets" (V. 138). In short, as in the following citation, it can be said that V scatters her symbols to the world so that she can directly and indirectly cause Profane and Melanie to have fear or desire to become the inanimate objects.

Cairo, Florence, Paris — that she fitted into a larger scheme leading eventually to *her personal destruction* and she might have shied off, come to *establish eventually so many controls over herself that she became* — to Freudian, behaviorists, man of religion, no matter — a purely determined organism, automaton, constructed, only quaintly, of human flesh. Or by contrast, might have reacted against the above, which we have come to call Puritan, by journeying even deeper into a fetish country until she become entirely and in reality — not merely as a love-game with any Melanie — *an inanimate object of desire*. (V. 41; emphasis added)

In other words, V seems to be a masochist, who wants her self-destruction in order to become an inanimate object. At the same time, V indirectly makes general people like Profane fear becoming the inanimate object. Moreover, V attempts to make them have a different "metaphysical desire" to

¹ After that, Profane comes to have a conversation with SHOCK: "[his] flesh was molded of foam vinyl, its skin vinyl plastisol, its hair a wig, its eyes cosmetic-plastic" (V. 79) and SHROUD; "synthetic human, radiation output determined." (V. 79)

become the inanimate objects. This is a strategy or conspiracy by V as a trigger to instigate World War I.

8. Conclusion

In *V.*, Pynchon depicts the destruction of the female characters and he is considered to be a misogynist. However, Lady V leads the conspiracy and forces people to become the inanimate objects by using her masochism and the power of self-destruction. This paper discussed the relation between Lady V and masochism during World War I. As a result, Lady V as a trigger to cause people to have a desire of becoming the inanimate objects.

During the World War, in *V.*, male characters such as Herbert, Sidney Stencil, and other male characters are afraid of V and they have doubts about whether V joins the War. Nevertheless, as a result, the truth of V is not clear in the the story. However, just because V is unclear and ambiguous, she can have the effect on the male characters and even the war. That means V is not just a lady. V stands for the metaphysical desire to become an inanimate object in the novel.

Although this paper discussed Pynchon's *V.* in comparison to *Gravity's Rainbow*, the discussion needs further investigation. The next goal is to demonstrate the relationship between female characters and the humans' inanimate object caused by the wars in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Through this research, Pynchon's position toward the war will be clear.

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